

Vladimir Bukovsky

(Spent a total of 12 years in imprisonment and in forced treatment)

Of course, my most famous and most vividly remembered day in prison was the last day, the day of my release. This was December 1976. Early in the morning after reveille, the blockman knocked on the cell door and said: “Get ready with things” [*“with things” is standard wording of an order meaning one should take all one’s belongings—Trans.*].

Which perplexed all of us, inasmuch as this could signify anything at all: transfer to another cell, to another block, a stage [*transport to another institution—Trans.*], punishment in the dungeon, etc. In order to at least somehow understand what was going on, we immediately started asking questions: “Should we take a mattress/not take a mattress? Should we take/not take this or that thing?”

But I had had my boots sent in for repair the night before, and I’m nearly shouting to the chief: “Bring the boots back”. They sent for the boots. They gathered us together with things, but in the end they pulled only me out. And here I am walking and demanding my boots. They answer me: “Yes, yes, we’ll bring them right away”. They lead me into the staging cell, I can already understand that it’s for a stage, but the boots still aren’t there. I start pairing up again: “Give the boots”. But they’re still not bringing them. We’re already at the guard room and I’m saying to the duty captain, whom I knew: “Citizen captain, look, my boots are in repair, see to it that they’re returned to me”. But he looked at me kind of pitifully and says: “Come on, you’re not going to need boots any more”. I was kind of taken aback just a bit. Generally speaking, there’s only one situation in life when boots aren’t needed.

But then they sit me not in a paddy wagon, but in a microbus. And on the whole, an untypical staging: there’s no convoy [*prisoner transport guards—Trans.*], but instead of it

civilian [*i.e. not uniformed—Trans.*] KGB men. And so we're riding from Vladimir. Police cars with lights flashing in front of us and behind us. Winter. We're driving at great speed, I'd already started getting scared that we might run into something. But in the end we arrived in Moscow. Once I ended up in Lefortovo, I calmed down a little, since this was a familiar place already, I'd been there many times. Well, I think, maybe they'll be interrogating me in some new case. But no. They dragged me out of there as well and drove me away again. And again there was this microbus, again these 12 *chekists* [*another term for KGB men—Trans.*] in civvies. This is getting really confusing. I just couldn't figure out where they were taking me now. I was racking my brains – I wasn't able to come up with any more theories.

We drove for quite a long time. About an hour. We finally arrived and stopped. The bosses are walking there, slamming little doors, but I can't understand where they've brought me. And suddenly I hear the roar of aviation engines: "Aah! An airport!" And in my situation, an airport signified only one thing – it means they're sending me away beyond the border.

This was absolutely unexpected. We didn't know anything about this exchange, nobody was telling us anything (*in December of 1976, Vladimir Bukovsky was exchanged for Chilean communist leader Luis Corvalán. - PTs*). This was not the civilian airport, this was the military base for the government's airplanes. And as became clear later, after many years – this was Andropov's plane. And it was empty. In it was I, then they seated my mother, sister and nephew. I in the tail end, they at the front of the plane. And these here 12 *chekists*. It was in such a complement that we flew away. I was in handcuffs; mother raised a scandal: "Why are you holding him in handcuffs?!" I tell them too: "Really, what are you worried about, anyway?" And it needs to be said that I had 59 kilograms in me. That is, 12 escort *chekists* were totally not necessary. The handcuffs too. Any strong overseer could just lift me up under the arms and carry me away. Much later, having read a book about the history of the "Alfa" group, I understood who my escorts were. They even write it right there: our

first combat mission – to take Bukovsky with family out for an exchange to Switzerland. Combat mission! Fabulous. As I understand it, Andropov had decided to give them a little holiday, so that they could take a walk down into the airport building, buy something there for their girlfriends and wives. Because why else 12 *chekists* from the “Alfa” group?! In theory, 12 warriors from “Alfa” could take half a city.

Their commander came up to me in the plane, he was called Baranov. In actuality he’s not Baranov, but I’ve already forgotten now what they called him. And he says: “Upon crossing the border I’m going to take the handcuffs off of you”. And upon crossing the border he announced that by a decision of the government I am being expelled from the territory of the Soviet Union. I say: “That’s all?” “Yes, that’s all”, he answers. “And what about my citizenship?” “You are not being deprived of citizenship, you are being given out a passport for residing beyond the border valid for 5 years”. “And the term? I’ve got half a term left still”. “The term is not being repealed for you”. “Something’s strange here”, I say. “Just what exactly is going on here from the legal point of view? You’re organizing my flight from places of deprivation of liberty?” He gave a kind of crooked smirk and said: “Go ahead and interpret it any way you like. I’m executing an order from the leadership”. They didn’t know themselves where we were flying. Even while we were in flight they were trying to figure out if it would be Geneva or Zurich. It turned out to be Zurich.